

Sermon – 28/09/2008 pm

God Stirs Cyrus

Study Text: Ezra 1:44

In 1879 a clay cylinder was discovered under a wall of ancient Babylon. It is now in the British Museum. King Cyrus is referred to in the cuneiform writing on this cylinder. He became ruler of Babylon and the entire near east and Egypt when he overthrew Belshazzar in 539BC. Cyrus is named in the book of Daniel because Daniel was in Babylon at this time. He had been deported there from Jerusalem. Daniel was a loyal servant to the king of Babylon and also served under the new regime of Cyrus. But he was an old man when Cyrus made his proclamation and did not return.

Reference to Cyrus is found long before he actually came to power in 539BC. Isaiah who prophesied in Israel over 150 years before Cyrus spoke of this king – *thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus whose right hand I have held* (Isaiah 45:1). He not only names Cyrus but calls him ‘anointed’, a man whom the Lord has chosen to restore Jerusalem and the temple of the Lord.

As we open the book of Ezra we find King Cyrus once again, this time fulfilling the words of the prophet. *In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia ... the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus* (1:1). Cyrus made an edict that was proclaimed throughout his kingdom – from India to Ethiopia (Esther 8:9). In this edict he said that the God of heaven had commanded him to build the house of the Lord God of Israel in Jerusalem. He urged the people of this God to go up and build the temple and worship their God.

Background

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah cover the return of Jewish exiles to Jerusalem. This happened in stages. These books cover a period of 100 years. Ezra picks up where the book of Chronicles leaves off; in fact there is a clear overlap in that the edict of Cyrus is repeated. Some suggest that these two books belong to the whole record of the Chronicles. We find a continuing interest in lists of families and other groups but there are also significant differences in style. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah however do have much in common and have historically been considered as a single book – or as book 1 and book 2. Jerome called Nehemiah the second book of Ezra, as did Wycliffe.

Whether or not Ezra and Nehemiah were in Jerusalem at the same time is still debated although they are mentioned together in Nehemiah 8:9 and 12:36. They did of course return at different times and with different assignments. Most accept that Ezra came back first – in the year 458BC or 80 years after Cyrus’ edict. Nehemiah returned over a decade later in 445BC. This history ends with Nehemiah reporting back to the king of Babylon after twelve years in Jerusalem and then returning to continue his reforms in Jerusalem (Nehemiah 13:6).

The first half of the book of Ezra is not actually about Ezra. It is about the return of the first contingent of exiles under the direction of Zerubbabel; a party of about 50,000. Their task was to rebuild the temple and restore worship of Yahweh as commanded by Cyrus. They built the altar and started to offer sacrifices once again according to the Law of Moses.

After two years they laid the foundation of the temple but the local inhabitants did their utmost to stop the work. They finally succeeded and the work on the temple came to a stop for some 15 years. After being admonished by the prophets Haggai and Zechariah they got back to work and completed rebuilding the temple in 515BC. Rebuilding the city wall, the task given to Nehemiah, came much later.

Fulfilment

With a change of government in Canberra we have seen many policy changes, not the least of which is that towards asylum seekers. The detention centre at Woomera, once filled with illegal immigrants, is now empty. Such people are now allowed to live in the community until their case is heard.

When Cyrus became king of Babylon there was a dramatic change in policy towards the Jewish exiles. Going back to the fall of the northern kingdom of Israel in 722BC, the Assyrian conquerors had a policy of assimilation. They deported some Jews but also imported other ethnic/religious groups into Israel. The Jews lost their racial purity and, more importantly, their religious purity. Some of these people appear as adversaries in these accounts of Ezra and Nehemiah. They came to Zerubbabel saying *we seek your God as you do* (4:2). Tobiah was from a Jewish family but his faith and worship had been corrupted through syncretism.

When Nebuchadnezzar conquered the southern kingdom (Judah) in 587BC he deported the Jews to Babylon where they mostly lived in ghettos. Only a few were left in the broken down city of Jerusalem. Many of these Jews, like Daniel and his friends, maintained their faith and worship of the one true God, the Lord God of Israel. They had the Scriptures to guide them.

One day when Daniel was reading his Bible he found that Jeremiah, who had prophesied the fall of Jerusalem and the exile, also prophesied that after 70 years God would bring them back and end the desolation of Jerusalem (Daniel9:2). Jeremiah's prophecy is also referred to at the end of Chronicles: *to fulfil the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land has enjoyed her Sabbaths. As long as she lay desolate she kept Sabbath, to fulfil seventy years* (II Chronicles 36:21). This prophecy of Jeremiah is referred to again in the first verse of Ezra.

God is not a man that he should lie ... has he spoken and will he not make good (Numbers 23:19). What the Lord says he will do; he will surely do. His words will not fall to the ground. Again and again throughout the Bible we find the words of the Lord being fulfilled, be it immediately or years or even centuries after he has spoken. Time is of no essence to the Lord. Truth however is. His promises do not fade with time. They will all be fulfilled in every detail.

The Lord God told Abraham his descendants would be servants in a strange land for 400 years – and so they lived in Egypt until Moses led them out in the Exodus (Genesis17:13, Exodus 12:40). He told Jeremiah his people would be exiled in Babylon for 70 years – and they were until Cyrus decreed their return in a manner not unlike the Exodus. Note how the returning exiles took many possessions and gifts with them as they left Babylon (1:4, 6).

Isaiah spoke of a man of sorrows, a man who was wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities and by whose stripes we are healed (Isaiah 53:5). This man can only be Jesus Christ of Nazareth who claimed to be the Son of God, who committed no sin but died on a cross and rose again from the dead, according to Scripture (Mark 14:49, I Corinthians 15:3-4). If every word of Scripture must be fulfilled what about those which have not yet been

fulfilled? What about Jesus saying he will return soon? Do you really believe that every word of the Bible will come true?

Isaiah actually names Cyrus as the one who will order the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the temple as we have already stated. We might have expected this prophecy to be referred to here in Ezra rather than, or along with, that of Jeremiah. But the words of Jeremiah refer more clearly to the end of the exile. That this was accomplished through Cyrus is a matter of detail – important detail none the less. With the Lord and his word even the minutest detail is important. The omniscient God knows everything in every detail. He works all things – not just some things – together for good to those who love him, to those who are called according to his purpose (Romans 8:28).

Stirred Up

God's word is always fulfilled because not only does he speak the truth but he is also all-powerful to carry out his purposes. The mountains are his for he made them. God can say to the mountain 'fall into the sea' and it will. Even the heart of the king is in the hand of the Lord. He controls not only his actions but his very thoughts.

The Lord stopped King Abimelech from harming Abraham and his wife when he went down south. The Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh against Moses. The Lord sent madness to the mind of Nebuchadnezzar making him think he was a cow – *till you know that the Most High rules in the kingdom of men and gives it to whomever he chooses* (Daniel 4:5). So it was that the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia to make this proclamation. He made him favourable towards the Jews, promoting their welfare and their worship.

We mentioned the Cyrus Cylinder that was discovered by archaeologists in ancient Babylon. On this it is written 'I returned to these sacred cities ... the sanctuaries of which have been in ruin for a long time, the images which (used) to live therein and established for them permanent sanctuaries. I (also) gathered all their (former) inhabitants and returned (to them) their habitations...'

The policy of the new regime it appears was to return all idols captured in conflicts to their original homes. Israel had no idols of course but articles from the temple had been taken to Babylon. These articles and the exiles themselves were repatriated by Cyrus. This (the Cyrus Cylinder) is what we call secular history. Rather than demonstrating the superior power of his god by taking idols of other gods and forcing the captives to worship his god, Cyrus it seems promoted freedom of religion – even to the extent of assisting in the rebuilding of Jerusalem. His only concern was that all his subjects pray for him. This is secular history.

Secular history, however, does not give the complete story. In the Bible we see history from God's perspective. King Cyrus was not acting alone – he was stirred into action by the Lord God. In the next section we will see that God also stirred up the Jews to return.

Do you believe that God stirs up men and women to fulfil his purposes today? What about the fall of the Soviet Union? What about other kingdoms of this world? What about events in your own life? Can you see things from God's perspective? Do you sometimes wonder how God is working in and through you in this world? Are you walking in his ways and doing his will today? Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever!

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